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ABSTRACT

By engaging in philosophical discussion in their writing, freshman composition students can discover that writing is a mediating tool between the self and the objective world, a means to examine the nature of reality and their thinking processes. Introducing philosophical issues opens the door for the investigation of difficult and abstract topics and challenges students to think about the nature of existence and reality. Furthermore, the oral component of the dialogue as a prewriting technique is of utmost importance, through which the writing teacher can encourage students to verbalize their ideas with the expectation that this dialectical encounter will enable students to take possession of their knowledge and contribute to the development of thought. The dialectic may further the students' self-awareness about the thinking process, adding to the metacognitive dimension of writing. Works such as Plato's "Myth of the Cave," Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," Paul Tillich's "The Riddle of Inequality," and Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" can suggest the thematic development of the course. Additionally, writing assignments based on personal experience and presented in narrative form enable students to move from the abstract to the particular in their essays. Since narration contains the ingredients of critical thinking, it serves as a logical starting point for developing other modes of writing. Analyzing personal experience in writing is a form of discovery and problem solving and leads students to more complex forms of discourse. (Sixteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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Introducing Philosophy to the Composition Class

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Teaching philosophy in a Freshman Composition class can be stimulating for both students and teachers. Introducing philosophical issues opens the door for the investigation of difficult and abstract topics and challenges students to think about the nature of existence and reality, concepts they may never have thought about or questioned before. Students are quick to engage in a dialogue about the nature of justice or the existence of evil, because on some level they have already been thinking about the topic and may already have experienced first hand the complexity of the human predicament. Also, in deciding to include philosophical issues in the composition class, the instructor must remember that in Plato's view of acquiring knowledge there is the inherent belief that in the process of learning we are remembering what we already know. In the Platonic realm, it is in the oral dialogue between teacher and student that meaning and truth are discovered. In this discovery process, the individual is involved in removing obstacles that obscure or prevent the acquisition of new insights or knowledge that she already possesses but has not appropriated in a conscious way. Equally significant is the fact that the student develops a deeper concept of the self, one constructed through critical inquiry and conflict.

To develop the interrelationship between the cognitive processes involved in thinking and writing, I decided to structure my writing classes on the principle of the dialectical method, to expose my students and myself to the rigorous demands of a dialogue which challenged my students ideas and beliefs as well as my own. The underlying assumption was the belief that in the service of the dialectic both parties are actively engaged in the

process of discovering meaning. This pedagogic approach combined an oral and written dimension, and during the semester, I established a group of readings that contributed to an on-going dialectical encounter between text and reality that led to a sense of closure. The readings supported a critical analysis of topics ranging from defining and analyzing abstract concepts of justice, equality, and freedom, to examining the origins of racism and prejudice, and sexual stereotyping. In developing assignments, I followed the belief that writing is a form of discovery and an exercise in problem solving, and I was inspired by Robert Scholes statement "that the relationship between the text and the world is not a given but a problem."(Scholes, 75).

In challenging my students' assumptions and beliefs, I intended to lay the foundation for the development of critical thinking skills through the act of writing and to illustrate for my students the problematic relationship existing between written and spoken language and the objective world. Finally, I hoped to bring students to the realization that writing is an extension of the self. As James Moffett has recently declared: "It is not by abandoning the self but by developing it that we achieve impartiality and validity. The deeper we go consciously into ourselves the better chance we have of reaching universality, as Montaigne knew so well. Transpersonal, not impersonal."(Stock, 172). I hoped that by engaging in philosphical discussions in the writing class, students would discover that writing is a mediating tool between the self and the objective world, a means to examine the nature of reality and their thinking processes.

From Plato to the Marxists, the dialectic has been understood

as a device that restructures consciousness and, as an ideological construct, determines a perception and construction of reality. In other words, we do not see what is we see what we believe in. Since the dialectical method functions as the foundation of western knowledge in all its manifestations, including the adversarial system of justice, it possesses its own inherent logic and can lead the participant to question every idea or concept including the effectivenesss of the dialectic itself. In using the dialectical method in class, a teacher creates an intellectual atmosphere that permits students to question the basis of their beliefs and value systems and, hopefully, challenges them to see writing as not only a way to define the self, but as an intellectual medium to question the moral and ethical consensus of the status quo, to guide students from the perception of what is to what ought to be. And in doing so, it is important to bear in mind the implications of Robert Scholes' warning that "the world resists language as the grain of a tree resists the saw, and saws take the form they do partly because wood is what it is. We sense the presence of things through this resistance. But, as with the saw, language differentiates by an act of violence."(Scholes, 112). Words struggle against the limits of their accepted meaning and the world and they embody the desire of the subject. For writing students, this becomes apparent when they discover the power of their writing on others as they challenge long held beliefs and assumptions and discover new meanings.

The influence of Platonic conceptions of knowing were instrumental in my teaching approach and methods, particularly the concepts of episteme and techne, episteme meaning self-awareness,

the unity of the knower with the known, which is centered in the world of values, and techne, the state of being informed about something objective by having access to facts and skills (Gouldner, 268). With episteme the individual takes precedence in the struggle for knowledge and, ultimately, there is a possibility for a concomitant change in behavior (Gouldner, 272), that what is known will change the knower, and possibly change her values. Futhermore, I was inspired by the idea that we are always struggling to realize the abstract in the particular, to express a universal idea or form in the concrete world in an attempt to capture the ever elusive thought in words. In my approach, there was an identification of reason with skepticism as a negative, critical concept in the Platonic tradition.

From a pedagogical point of view, I believe that teaching necessitates a theoretical basis for understanding the complexity of learning, and now more than ever, theory must have a place in the classroom. And, most importantly, like many teachers of writing, I am concerned with my students' lack of critical thinking skills and their inability to see relationships between ideas and question the dominant values and beliefs of society. My observations were confirmed by the reports of colleagues in other disciplines, who reported a lack of critical thinking in their students' writing and reading, and a general inability to make moral and ethical judgments in interacting with complex issues or a body of knowledge. For example, I cite an account by a history professor in an introductory course who became despondent over her students' response to an essay question examining the institution of slavery, specifically in the ante-bellum South. In a class of

fifty, not one student directed her response to the immorality and inhumanity of the system, or questioned the economic motives of the dominant social class. Instead, the students commented objectively, stating what it was, where it was, why it was, and so on. In other words, they were simply reporting facts. What was missing was obvious: the ability to critically evaluate information and to position the self in the world of moral and ethical values, and, ultimately, to make judgments based on a critical analysis of that information.

Introducing a theory of the dialectic to my composition class contributed to a stimulating atmosphere and forced my students to formulate questions that examined controversial societal and ethical issues. It placed them in a web of complex issues with multiple grey areas. But the threads of the web were already in place, because I believe that students already have ideas and opinions on a variety of subjects. However, they have yet to question the validity of their ideas and beliefs by deepening their relationship to experience. What they must do is test their ideas against an often recalcitrant and illusive reality, what Robert Scholes would call "the grain of the tree." That is why discussing moral and ethical issues in the classroom is important because it encourages intellectual conflict and, therefore, helps to clarify not only the issues but thinking as well. When they are presented with a challenging oral discussion in the prewriting stage, students are capable of discovering unusual insights and ideas that will be translated into their essays.

If they include philosophical texts in their curriculum, composition teachers need to provide contextual information and

create an intertextual relationship with their student's narratives. Instructors serve as mirrors and are catalysts for generating discussion, and they must see where the threads can be tied from personal knowledge to an objective discussion of a philosophical issue. Contextualizing knowledge by relating it to the student's experience is a vital part of the teaching process, especially when students are confronted with new and sophisticated ideas. Students need to be shown how much they already know and then come to understand how personal knowledge and objective knowledge interact. To make this interaction effective, the instructor must guide the class through the oral stage of composing, since it is here that ideas take shape and voices and personas are discovered.

If, as many writing theorists postulate, writing is a means to reappropriate the self and reconceptualize experience, as well as to discover meaning, then our students exploration of oral and written language is not totally dissimilar to the experiments of great novelists like Joyce and Faulkner, both of whom believed in the power of language to recover meaning and reconstruct the self through memory traces and writing. Viewed in such a light, teaching composition and writing essays need not be defined as an uncreative and tedious endeavor. Instead, essays may be considered artistic prose, exploratory and speculative in the vein of Montaigne, and the chosen mode of written expression for many of our best writers from Orwell to Stephen Jay Gould, and for some of our most gifted and inspired teachers.

Also, if it is true as some educators speculate, that students are in large part a marginalized and alienated group, it

is understandable that the act of writing is threatening, for in writing we oscillate between self and nonself, always on the verge of new beginnings. This philosophical precept informed my class discussions, and I supported the students' recognition that there is uncertainty and a moral and ethical vacuum in the world, and that disaffection and alienation are authentic responses to the given state of affairs. This encouraged students to express their opinions, and often led to further questioning, since the source of their alienation was, as I saw it, the conflict between the development of an independent identity and the demands of the larger world of society and community. However, in this creative tension lurked the beginnings of knowledge, and my pedagogical objective was to find ways to tap into this identity gap and use it constructively in class discussions and for generating writing assignments. For example, in a discussion on the power of public opinion and authority over the individual, I asked some students to analyze why they reacted to the positive effects of authority with resentment and sarcasm. Students in the class who considered authority to be necessary and beneficial found themselves on the defensive. Their critics were in the process of asserting their identity and it was apparent that they had ambivalent feelings about authority, both resenting and fearing it. Clearly in their opinion, the individual had to constantly question and defy authority. This initial discussion led to an analysis of stereotyping, the dynamics involved, and the purposes it served for those who used it, and eventually to an examination of the societal and psychological forces underlying prejudice and racism. This was helpful for developing a contextual framework for

understanding James Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village" and other essays dealing with racial prejudice.

To enable students to move from the abstract to the particular in their essays, I began with writing assignments based on personal experience and presented in narrative form. Since I believe that narration is the source of all modes of discourse, and contains the ingredients of critical thinking, it served as a logical starting point for developing other modes of writing. In analyzing personal experience, students were beginning to connect with more complex forms of discourse. For example, a class discussion on the nature of injustice eventually led to a writing assignment based on the students' reactions to being treated unjustly by an authority or in a more discriminatory manner. This led to an examination of ethical conflict and to a discussion of justice and equality, since understanding the concept of justice was essential if one was to define an unjust act or law, and because what some students considered to be unjust, others did not. Finally, it prepared the way for an analysis of Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," Paul Tillich's "The Riddle of Inequality" and Conrad's <u>The Heart of Darkness</u>, all of which supported and reinforced the nature of the dialogue and the thematic development of the course, especially the relationship between authority, power, and the individual. The dialectical relationship between personal and social discourse was at the heart of the discussions, and the source of the narrative discourse of the students' essays. In a sense, all good writing emerges from the rhetorical and conceptual framework of narrative discourse and begins with the desire to tell a story.

Another topic focussed on how individuals come to recognize and seek the meaning of abstractions or higher truths. To explore this trend of thought, we read and discussed Plato's "Myth of the Cave." We examined the idea of the soul's desire to seek the eternal ideas, such as the Good, and move from the darkness of the cave into light of the sun. The students were curious about why some refuse to see the truth and prefer shadows over reality. Students looked for metaphors and analogies to understand these ideas, and the essay stimulated more discussion than any other. The students were very much taken by the metaphors and poetic language of the essay, and especially the distinction between the world of illusion, the shadow-world of the cave, and a transcendental, timeless reality of eternal truths. They were intrigued by the discrepancy between these worlds, and the difference between appearance and reality, and were quick to provide examples from their everyday experience.

Our class dialogue concentrated on the metaphorical and symbolical meaning Plato attached to the sun. Students analyzed what the sun represented and discussed how the world of the senses can be illusory as well as deceiving. But their major concern was how the sun affected the individual who emerged from the darkness, and how one came to know she was in the presence of a higher truth or ideal. To stimulate discussion, I asked for examples of a person who had a vision of a higher truth and tried to influence his fellow men. Students mentioned Ghandi, the Kennedy's, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Thoreau as individuals who were motivated by a vision of an ideal world. A follow-up discussion ensued about the relationship between laws and freedom, and the

fact that societal changes often result from political and social conflict and the sheer determination of certain individuals to move mountains. Many students recognized the importance of the Civil Rights Movement in the struggle for racial equality through confrontation and eventually legislation, but they had little historical knowledge when it came to questions about women's rights, the legal rights of the physically handicapped, ethnic groups, the rights of the terminally ill, and others. But they were curious and eager to explore the topics.

In class, I explained the historical antecedents for the emergence of these laws. My purpose was to show, in a Platonic sense, how an abstract idea such as justice or equality is always in the process of being defined in concrete terms, and that someone must be constantly identifying the existence of inequality and injustice because people are often shortsighted or self-interested, and blindly accodomate themselves to half-truths and self-deceptions, the shadows of the cave. To make these ideas meaningful within the context of their experience, I proposed a series of questions, a set of heuristics that asked students to identify a current injustice and why they thought it was so, and how it affected them and others. I also asked that they write an essay explaining why this must be changed. Some wrote about personal injustices they experienced; a few were able to make comparisons with an injustice done to others and universalize from their experience, moving into a larger world of objective values and ideas, a major accomplishment. In analyzing Plato's essay, the students were interested in the response of the prisoners in the cave to the one returning from the light after seeing the truth. I

believe that a pure emotional response to the power of allegory was at work here. Their questions were many. Why wouldn't they listen to him? Didn't they understand that he wanted to liberate them? Questions such as this led to an understanding that those who follow a higher law or have a vision are often in conflict with others, and that it is out of this conflict that truth often emerges.

Generally, it was Plato's essay that provided the textual thread that tied together all other writing assignments. The major thrust of the essay was to show that ideas have an affect on the objective world because they change the way individuals perceive and think. This came as a revelation to some because they had never realized how ideas may affect and change their lives, and influence the decisions they made or the values they chose to live by. It also led them to see how the ideas of others, particularly authority figures, such as legislators, judges, and teachers, influence their lives.

After reading and discussing "On the Fear of Death" by Dr.Kubler-Ross, I asked students to imagine how they would feel about living through a prolonged, terminal illness or to imagine the slow and painful death of a loved one. What would they do in such a situation? Finally, I asked students to write an essay defending their position on whether there should be a law permitting suicide or euthanasia in specific situations. This elicited some provocative writing and clearly demonstrated the positive relationship between good writing and a stimulating topic.

In other prewriting assignments, I asked students to imagine

someone who was oppressed, such as a political prisoner imprisoned for their beliefs, and to write about what that would feel like in the essay. An imaginative encounter with another's predicament is challenging to students at all levels, and helps them to see their preconceived assumptions and ideas in a different way. Also, identifying with others leads to experimenting with different narrative perspectives in writing. An interesting assignment on whether one can be free while in captivity came out of this discussion and eventually led to an examination of the many meanings of freedom, i.e. freedom to and freedom from, a la Erich Fromm, and an analysis of political and economic freedom.

In class, I would directly challenge their beliefs and ideas and become the "Other", intentionally assuming the role of an authority by taking a traditional stance on a topic in order to provoke a response or the defense of an idea. From my theoretical standpoint, it is important that the teacher roleplay in the class by taking an unpopular position to further a discussion or to clarify a point. What must be avoided at all costs is the reification of the teacher's role, the tendency to allow our beliefs and ideas to become objectified in the role of teacher. Likewise, it is important not to evade the challenging question or the probing remark that may come a little too close to home. Teachers must shed their preconceived beliefs and ill-founded truths and move into the light also; students are reassured about the dialectical process when they observe the teacher engaged in questioning her ideas. What must be set aside is the omnipresent belief that the classroom must be a smoothly running operation where each has her place, and where the teacher has an emotional

investment in maintaining order and control.

During discussions, I had to consciously control the traditionalist in myself, my need to control the discussion, and take time to listen consciously for cues about where the discussion was going and let it take its own course. As a philosophical precept, I believe that order can emerge from chaos, and creativity is always well served in this process. And as all teachers know, being a skilled communicator is being a skilled listener, as Carl Rogers has told us in his description of the art of active listening. Students, like all of us, resent someone trying to impose a meaning or dominate a conversation. In the midst of our discussions, I was reminded of Jacques Lacan's idea that the unconscious is structured like a language, and in all interpersonal communication we are responding to unconscious as well as overt cues and meanings.

Teaching philosophical issues and ideas in my writing class convinced me that the oral component of the dialogue as a prewriting technique is of the utmost importance. Through the oral dialogue, students are able to formulate and respond to their own questions as well as the instructor's; it serves as a catalyst for the production of ideas in an essay. In this dialectical encounter, students are continually searching their interior consciousness, looking for linguistic and syntactical forms in which to express their meaning. As Peter Elbow points out in an October 1985 CCCC's article "Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing" the most difficult process for writing students is the process of "meaning making" that they are engaged in when speaking and finding ways to transfer it to the text. All

teachers of writing, I am sure, are virtually amazed at times at the ability of a student to expound orally on a subject with clarity and depth, but be unable to translate and approximate this verbal meaning in writing. It is here in the oral dimension that much valuable work must begin.

In his article, Elbow refers to the work of Walter Ong. According to Ong, the spoken word takes precedence in the creation of meaning, even in an age of electronic print, and he explains one of the major differences between the spoken and written word and the ability of the former to be easily understood: "One reason for this situation is of course that the spoken word is part of present actuality and merges with a total situation to convey meaning. Context for the spoken word is furnished ready-made. In written performance the writer must establish both meaning and context..."(Ong, 117). And he continues with an interesting statement concerning the nature of sound: "Sound is a special sensory key to interiority. Sound has to do with interiors as such, which means with interiors as manifesting themselves, not as withdrawn into themselves, for true interiority is communicative. Sound is a clue to interiors in the physical as well as in the psychological sense. More than other sensory phenomena, sound makes interiors known as interiors..."(Ong, 117). The spoken word conveys presence, exists in time rather than space, and is based on narration, unlike the printed word which exists in space and, therefore, is centered on a logical, temporal sequence. According to Ong, understanding the forms of oral discourse is the key to seeing its importance in conveying knowledge.

Writing teachers have to encourage students to verbalize

their ideas, to engage in dialogue, with the expectation that this dialectical encounter will enable them to take possession of their knowledge and contribute to the development of thought. In addition, the dialectic may further the students' self-awareness about the thinking process, adding to the metacognitive dimension of writing. As Anne Berthoff tells us: "Language is our means of form-finding and form-creating, and it involves us in looking and looking again; in stating and re-stating; in trying out many how's to go with many what's. When we see forming as an activity of mind central to both reading and writing, we will have no difficulty finding ways to keep reading and writing together."(Stock, 168). What better way to challenge students to think and discover these forms, than by presenting them with philosophical issues, to force them to struggle with uncertainty and doubt and investigate the foundations of knowledge. In doing so, they experience the best of the humanities tradition and may come to know how the mind constucts knowledge and creates methods for validating perception and belief.

As teachers of writing, we have more knowledge and information at our disposal than ever before. But we must be wary of easily discovered truths that may minimize the complexity of the problems. Like Socrates, the great promoter of rationalism, who at the end of his days began to compose verse which he had previously devalued, we too must heed the muse's call and venture into turbulent waters, for only then can we honestly serve our students as truth-seekers. As teachers of writing, we are engaged in the dialectical process and, as a result, we must also wrestle with our values and ideas, recalling the New Testament dictum

"Physician heal thyself." And unlike Plato, we must put aside the desire for a utopia that denies the contradictory and the irrational, and include these and the imaginative, even the fanciful, in our pursuit of methods to help our students think. And, finally, we must attune our ears to the unsaid, to sound the depths for the formation of new worlds, and become sooth-sayers of the sub-text by listening to our students struggle with meaning. Then we can intervene more effectively and develop what Michael Polyani calls in relation to the art of problem solving "an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars."(Polyani, 21). By integrating philosophy and the dialectical method into our classes, we present our students with a method for critical thinking that will not only serve them but us as well.

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